

THE WEDGE COLLECTION AND THE CONUNDRUM OF HUMANE COLONISATION

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The first encounter

Saffron Walden Museum is a place of wonderment. For £2.50 visitors can see an Egyptian mummy, a lock of Napoleon's hair and Wallace the lion, stilled by his taxidermist since 1838. When I first visited the museum nearly ten years ago, my interest took me up a wooden staircase to a space perhaps less visited. The 'Worlds of Man' gallery was filled with indigenous-made artefacts from around the world, many of which had been there for more than 150 years.¹ African statues, Hawaiian bark cloths, American tomahawks, and what I had come to see: the wooden Indigenous artefacts collected by surveyor John Helder Wedge at the close of the Tasmanian 'Black War' and in the first months of settlement in Victoria in 1835.

They were beautiful: clubs of warm yellow wood with beehive-shaped handles, boomerangs with the creases of the gum tree visible in their arcs, oval bark shields with white pipeclay ochre inlaid in sharp chevrons and rolling waves, and spears more than two metres long, some with deadly rows of barbs

cut along their edges. The Wedge Collection is one of the most significant collections of early south-eastern Australian Indigenous wooden artefacts in the world. So, as I looked at it that day I wondered: why is it so little known? Why is it in a little museum in Essex? What *is* its story?

There may be as many as 250 000 Australian Indigenous-made artefacts in collections around the world.² Only a tiny portion of that vast number is wooden artefacts from south-east Australia's early colonial period. A devastating history of settlement and issues of preservation have made them rare. And many of those artefacts have little information about who made or collected them. This is partly because museums traditionally acquired Indigenous artefacts in order to illustrate the exotic and primitive, not to tell the stories of their collection.

To revisit those stories can be important for south-eastern Indigenous communities. The old artefacts can provide a source of inspiration and information to

1 Len Pole, *Worlds of Man: An Abridged Catalogue of the Ethnography Collections at the Saffron Walden Museum*, Saffron Walden Museum, Essex, 1987.

2 Philip Jones, *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2007, p. 5.

contemporary makers, and knowing who made them can offer an important point of connection to the ancestors. The stories of collection can also challenge and invigorate a wider connection to Australia's past. The exhibition *Encounters*, which opened at the National Museum of Australia in late 2015, presented the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections in the British Museum with the stories of their collection for the first time. The result stirred controversy.

The exhibition's centrepiece was a wooden Gweagal warrior's shield collected at Australia's emblematic *first* encounter: Captain James Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1770. A clear hole in the shield's centre drew the eye, literally. Was it a spy-hole for the warrior? Was it pierced by a spear thrown before Cook's arrival? Or was it, as the Gweagal elders believe, a hole made by a bullet from one of Cook's muskets?³ Any of those possibilities challenge the idea of Cook 'discovering' an unknown land, while the violence of this meeting can be seen as beginning the more than 200 years of dispossession that followed. To look through the display glass at the Gweagal shield is to peer through the looking glass of history.

Could the Wedge Collection offer a similar view? John Helder Wedge was born near Saffron Walden in 1793, and arrived in Tasmania aged 31 to take up the position of government assistant surveyor. By 1835 he had resigned and with his neighbour, John Batman, formed the Port Phillip Association with a plan to establish a new colony across the Bass Strait through a 'treaty' with Kulin leaders. It is as explorer and mapmaker of the

country around present-day Melbourne that Wedge is best remembered. That he was a collector has been overlooked even by the authors of his 1962 biography, partly because Wedge kept no account of his collecting in his own records.⁴ But Museum experts have long been aware of the Wedge Collection.⁵ In 2011 the National Museum of Australia



Shield 1835.29, Wedge Collection, Saffron Walden Museum. This image is shown respectfully to encourage dialogue around important cultural connections. *Please do not reproduce.*

- 3 Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2016, pp. 317–19.
- 4 The Hon. Mr Justice Crawford, W.F. Ellis and G.H. Stancombe (eds), *The Diaries of John Helder Wedge 1824–1835*, Royal Society of Tasmania, 1962.
- 5 N.J.B. Plomley, 'A List of Tasmanian Aboriginal material in Collections in Europe', *Records of the Queen Victoria Museum Launceston*, New Series, no. 15, 1962, p. 5; Carol Cooper, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Institute Report Series, Canberra, 1989, p. 234.

photographed the collection and exhibited four of the artefacts he collected in Port Phillip on temporary loan. In the same year, ABC Radio National's *Hindsight* program produced a documentary on Wedge that used his collection as a launching point for the story of his life.⁶ The foremost impression it gave was of a man with strong Christian principles; a 'humanitarian' concerned for Indigenous peoples' wellbeing and interested in their culture. But I was left asking: who were the makers of the artefacts? How were they collected? As I began to search for answers, I found myself asking: was Wedge really a 'humanitarian'? His rhetoric was compassionate (if rather condescending) but his intentions and actions on the Tasmanian and Victorian frontiers were not always benevolent.

What follows is not only a detective-story account of my attempt to match artefacts to encounters, but also a wider reflection on 'humanitarian governance', the attempt by the British government in the early to mid-nineteenth century to expand their empire in ways they argued would benefit indigenous peoples; what might be summarised with the oxymoron 'humane colonisation'.

The first instalment: 1835

In March 1835, Charles Wedge, father to John Helder and resident of the Shudy Camps village, wrote to the Saffron Walden Natural History Society. He had for their museum

four 'weapons used by the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land': a 'parrying' shield of solid wood, a painted oval bark shield, a barbed spear and a 'waddy' or club. The weapons had presumably been sent by his son with descriptions for their various uses in fighting. Charles closed his letter with this reflection: 'It may be wondered what naked people who have no fixed residence can have to enter into such conflicts', a thought that seems ironic, if not poignant.⁷

His son John Helder had been the assistant surveyor since his arrival in Tasmania in 1824. His role was integral to the colony's transformation from penal settlement into a destination for free settlers. The change was swift and brought widespread frontier violence between the settlers and the Aborigines. More than 2 million acres—all the arable land in Tasmania—was granted by 1831, and most of it was issued after 1824.⁸ Wedge had received 1500 acres in the island's north, a property he named 'Leighlands', where he had hopes of making money from wool. But most of his time was spent exploring potential new country in the island's north and central highlands as well as 'marking off' the boundaries of grants already issued.⁹ The work brought 'many difficulties, dangers and privations', he reflected.¹⁰ He had written to his father in 1828 of an alarming encounter with spear-wielding Aborigines on the north-west coast (an event to which I will return).¹¹

6 'John Helder Wedge', *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, 5 June 2011, <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/hindsight/john-helder-wedge/2954118>>.

7 Letter from Charles Wedge to Mr Gibson of the Saffron Walden Natural History Society, 23 March 1835, pasted into *No. 1 Register of Articles Obtained for the Saffron Walden Museum from the Year 1832 to 1880 or 1881*, p. 241.

8 Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 22.

9 Crawford et al., pp. xi–xiii.

10 John Helder Wedge, 'Autobiographical sketch', 1837, A 576, John Helder Wedge Papers, 1824–43, State Library New South Wales (SLNSW), p. 13.

11 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828, Wedge Family Papers, 1824–79, MLMSS 188, SLNSW.

By this time tensions in the grant country had grown. The ‘complaints were loud and constant’, Wedge remembered, as settlers demanded the colonial government remove the Aborigines by force.¹² Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur effected a militarised campaign.¹³ There were 300 troops stationed at settlers’ homes and dispatched in small groups from Hobart to Launceston from April 1828. When Arthur proclaimed martial law in November, those groups were permitted to shoot any Aboriginal who resisted arrest.¹⁴ Wedge was on the ‘Black Line’ of late 1830—a government operation of 2000 military men and civilians that sought to capture the Aborigines in a sweeping, pincer-like movement across the island’s ‘settled districts’. The line prompted uproarious contemporary criticism when it captured only two Aborigines. By contrast George Augustus Robinson’s ‘friendly’ missions were hailed as a success.¹⁵ By 1835, when the Wedge artefacts arrived in Saffron Walden Museum, almost all the remaining Tasmanian Aborigines had been incarcerated on Flinders Island in the Bass Strait.

The four weapons sent to Saffron Walden were labelled as ‘Van Diemen’s Land’ Aboriginal artefacts, and for the next half-century the description went unquestioned. Then in 1880, Saffron Walden Museum employed its first professional curator, Guy Maynard. Over the following few years

Maynard recorded the museum’s entire collection in two large registers, illustrating many of the artefacts by hand, pasting in any related records, and adding his own notes. When he came to list the four artefacts presented by Charles Wedge in 1835, Maynard described them as being made by ‘Natives of New South Wales’.¹⁶ It seems he had done his research.

Maynard named the ‘guard’ or parrying shield a ‘tamarang’, possibly after a similar artefact housed in Oxford University’s Pitt Rivers Museum, for he often consulted other local collections.¹⁷ The name is close to ‘tawarrang’ or ‘tawourang’, a transcription by Europeans in early Sydney of an Indigenous word for the parrying shields they saw there and which, they noted, were also used as a musical instrument struck by a club.¹⁸

Earlier this year, I visited the Australian Museum with Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones.¹⁹ We stood before his work *marri ngalaya/many friends*, an exhibit of nearly 100 old and new wooden parrying shields. We noted several examples comparable to the shield donated by Wedge in 1835. We also found two NSW spears very similar to the one Wedge sent, with 14 barbs cut onto one side. In the museum’s conservation laboratory Jonathan and I were shown one of the oldest NSW shields from the museum’s collections. Crafted from a thin piece of bark cut into an oval shape, it had

12 Wedge, ‘Autobiographical sketch’, p. 14.

13 Nick Brodie, *The Vandemonian War: The Secret History of Britain’s Tasmanian Invasion*, Hardie Grant, Melbourne, 2017, pp. 30–2.

14 Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History since 1803*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012, pp. 101, 105.

15 Crawford et al., p. xlv; Wedge, ‘Autobiographical sketch’, pp. 14–21; Ryan, pp. 131–41; Brodie, pp. 318–21.

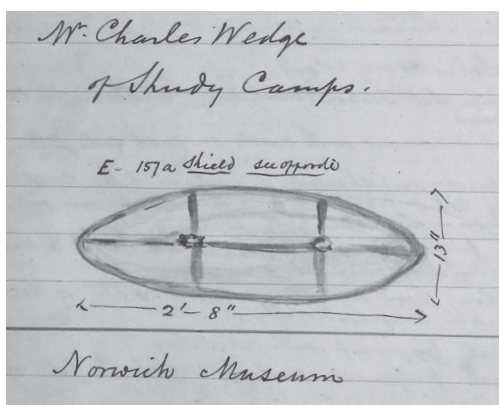
16 *No. 1 Register*, p. 24, and *Register A*, Saffron Walden Museum.

17 Parrying shield ‘Tamarang’, Pitt Rivers Museum 1874 catalogue entry, accession number 1884.30.3, <http://www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era_Resources/Era/Pitt_Rivers/shieweap/shcurinf/currinf1.html>.

18 Val Attenbrow, *Sydney’s Aboriginal Past: Investigating the Archaeological and Historical Records*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, p. 97.

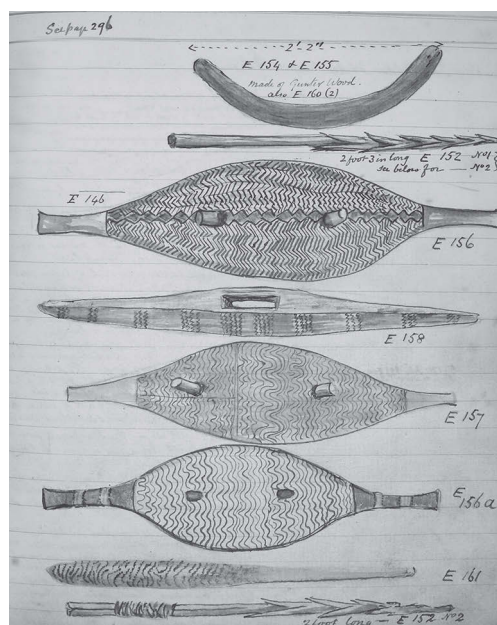
19 Rebe Taylor, ‘A Trip to the Australian Museum’, <<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs/trip-australian-museum>>.

a bent-wood handle inserted into two holes, similar to the Gweagal shield collected by Cook in 1770. This shield, however, had been painted with crossed, straight red ochre bands on both sides. The shield donated by Wedge in 1835 was similar to it. While most of the ochre had been almost completely removed, perhaps in a misguided attempt to clean it, Maynard's drawing from the early 1880s revealed it had once had clear red stripes of ochre against a white ochre background, a design attributed to coastal Sydney.²⁰



Only the waddy listed as being donated by Wedge in 1835 did not appear to Jonathan to be a NSW design. He pulled out his iPhone and showed me a picture of a club made in 1897 by William Barak of the Wurundjeri people of the Birrarung (Melbourne) area. It had the same straightness and fine, tapered point.²¹ But there is a club in the Wedge Collection like ones depicted by the Port Jackson Painter in about 1788–95—bent with clustered bands of engraved lines—which I think may have been the one sent in 1835.²² Jonathan suggested that a nineteenth-century English curator was unlikely to know the differences

in Indigenous regional designs and that the clubs may well have been muddled over the years. But the question remained: how did Wedge collect artefacts of NSW design in Tasmania? The possible answer makes Charles Wedge's musings as to the reasons the Tasmanian Aborigines should have to 'enter into conflict' even more poignant: for the weapons he presented in 1835 may once have belonged to the men employed to capture them.



The 1835 (detail, left) and 1838 Wedge accessions to the Saffron Walden Museum, No. 1 Register, c. 1880.

Batman's war

In August 1829 John Batman announced to the Launceston press that he was going to 'capture all the Aborigines, or as many as [he] can'.²³ In addition to his military campaign, Arthur encouraged settlers to form their own 'roving parties' to capture Aborigines.

20 No. 1 Register, p. 23.

21 Club made by William Barak, 1897, Koorie Heritage Trust, <<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/the-koorie-heritage-trust-collections-and-history/club-made-by-william-barak/>>.

22 Attenbrow, plate 23.

23 *Launceston Advertiser*, 24 August 1829, p. 3, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/8721202>>.

Most of these guerrilla-style groups formed by settlers employed a Tasmanian Aboriginal guide, but Batman's roving party was distinct. In addition to ten convict servants, he had two Indigenous men from New South Wales. Jonninbia or 'John Crook' was originally from Five Islands, near Illawarra on the NSW south coast, but he may have known Batman since he was a boy. Jonninbia had been renamed after William Pascoe Crook, who opened the first boarding school in Parramatta in 1804, where Batman had been born three years earlier. The second young man was Warroba, or Pigeon, also from the NSW south coast, near Shoalhaven. He had been living on the Bass Strait islands with Tasmanian Aboriginal women and sealers when he made contact with Crook and Batman.²⁴ It may have been the sealing trade that first brought south coast Indigenous people such as Pigeon and Crook into Sydney then beyond, from the early 1800s, although the communities of Sydney and the south coast have long-standing and deep family and cultural connections.

'[N]o possible means could ensure the desired effect better than the Sydney Blacks', Batman no doubt prompted the journalist: they had 'their dexterity in the use of the spear, their quickness in guarding themselves from any spear wound by means of their shield, (made of the iron bark tree) ... and their usefulness in providing themselves and company with game'.²⁵ But such 'dexterity' would not have been required on their first mission. Crook and Pigeon too were issued with muskets.

On the first day of spring 1829 Batman, Crook, Pigeon and the convicts travelled to the east side of Ben Lomond, not far from Batman's property, 'Kingston'. They remained hidden near a cluster of Aboriginal huts until close to midnight. Then the Aborigines' dogs sounded the alarm, and Batman gave the orders to fire. They massacred about 12 men and women as they ran away into the dark. At sunrise they saw the blood, and found two severely wounded men, whom Batman later shot. They also took a woman, Luggenemenener, and her two-year-old son Rolepana to Batman's property. Batman decided to keep the boy 'if His Excellency [Governor Arthur] has no objections'. His mother's objections were ignored; she was sent to Campbell Town gaol.²⁶

It was due to Pigeon's ability to speak some Tasmanian language, Batman believed, that they were able to seize 11 people without bloodshed on the south-east coast two weeks later. Four women, two babies, two small boys and two young men were taken to Campbell Town gaol (although Batman had one of the small boys, Lurneminner, later at Kingston, and never returned him). The Tasmanian press hailed Batman's ambush a 'humanitarian' success, and 12 months later he was granted 2000 acres of land.²⁷

By August 1831 Pigeon and Crook had travelled to Sydney, and returned with five other men: Pigeon's brother, Macher (Mackey), Numbunghundy (Sawyer) from near Shoalhaven, Garrammilly (Jack Radly) and Nillang (Steward) and Onnororong (Waterman) from near Jervis Bay. About a

24 G.A. Robinson Journals, February–July 1832, Robinson Papers 1818–24, Series 2, Z A 7030 (vol. 9) pt. 5, SLNSW; N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Quintus Publishing, Hobart, 2008, pp. 505–8; Alistair H. Campbell, *John Batman and the Aborigines*, Kibble Books, Malmsbury, 1987, p. 10.

25 *Launceston Advertiser*, 24 August 1829.

26 John Batman to Thomas Anstey, 7 September 1829, 'Reports of Roving Parties', CSO1/320/7578, vol. 7, pp. 142–5, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO); Campbell, pp. 31–2; Brodie, pp. 98–100.

27 Batman to Anstey, 21 September and 13 October 1829, pp. 146–7, 155–8; Brodie, pp. 104–6, 214; Campbell, pp. 33–4, 61; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 945–6.

month later Quannmurrer (Joe the Marine) from near Jervis Bay and Bulberlang (John Peter) from near Shoalhaven followed. In March 1832 Budgergorry (William), possibly from Eden, landed in Launceston after spending five years sealing on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, and joined the other south coast men at Kingston.²⁸

They were intrepid men prepared to carry out perilous work far from home, and they apparently thought it worthwhile. They were issued with rations and clothing, and those whose duties were terminated in early 1833 were returned to New South Wales with £10 each. Pigeon, Crook, Joe the Marine, Macher and Steward chose to travel with Batman to Port Phillip in 1835, while two or three others were seemingly recruited for that task. At Batman's entreaties, Pigeon and Crook, and possibly Steward, were each rewarded with 100 acres of land adjacent to Kingston.²⁹

It was surveyor Wedge who marked out these leases in early 1833.³⁰ It was not his first time at Kingston; he had been a regular visitor since 1825, when Wedge had marked Batman's grant along the Ben Lomond River. As Wedge later wrote to historian James Bonwick, at that first meeting, their conversation turned to exploring the 'interior'

of the mainland, and after that they 'rarely, if ever, met afterwards without renewing the subject'.³¹ For Wedge that day marked the beginning of a dream he shared with Batman: to found a new colony across the Bass Strait.

Exploration excited Wedge. His usually succinct field diaries reveal his delight in ascending Ben Lomond in early 1833 with Batman, the artist John Glover and several of the NSW Indigenous men. Looking down from the mountain's rocky precipice, Wedge named the tarn he saw below 'Pigeon's Well' after the man who first pointed it out to him.³² The relationship grew. Two of the NSW men assisted Wedge and the surveyor general George Frankland when they explored the source of the Derwent River in 1835. By that time Wedge may have had one of the men in his personal employ.³³

Certainly Wedge had the opportunity and, as we shall see, the interest, to collect the NSW men's artefacts. Batman had requested that the NSW men 'bring with them their own weapons', and while they used muskets while 'roving', at least on one occasion Batman sent them out armed only with their spears in order that they should communicate with Tasmanian Aborigines on 'friendly', or at least equal, terms.³⁴ But do the artefacts

28 Robinson Journals, February–July 1832; Campbell, p. 57; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 505–8, 518, 607.

29 Campbell, pp. 45, 60; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 507–8; John Batman, 'List of Men belonging to the Party under Batman', with a note signed by Gov. Arthur on 11 September 1830 and letter from John Batman to John Burnett, 17 January 1831. Both this list and letter were probably originally part of 'Reports of Roving Parties', but since 1935 have been part of the Autograph collection of the State Library of Victoria (SLV).

30 John Helder Wedge, *Diary and memoranda, 1824–35*, 2 February 1833, A 1429/vol. 1, SLNSW; Crawford et al., p. 65.

31 Letter from John Helder Wedge to James Bonwick, 23 February 1856, in James Bonwick, *Port Phillip Settlement*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, London, 1883, facsimile inserted between pp. 276 and 277; Crawford et al., p. xv.

32 Wedge *Diary and memoranda*, 28 January 1833; Crawford et al., p. 64. See also letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 1 February 1833, Wedge Family Papers.

33 Wedge *Diary and memoranda*, 6 February 1835, SLNSW; Crawford et al., p. 76; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 868.

34 Batman to Anstey, 18 March and 12 April 1830, 'Reports of the Roving Parties', pp. 177–81; Campbell, p. 38.

in Saffron Walden Museum only recall the role for which the NSW men are best remembered, as ‘auxiliaries’ to an aggressive colonial policy to remove Tasmanian Aborigines?³⁵ Or do they suggest that the NSW men were also practising and sharing their traditional culture in Tasmania?

In 1832, Steward, Macher, Joe the Marine and William travelled with G.A. Robinson to the north-west coast to bring in the Aborigines remaining there. Before they left, the NSW men danced together, ‘with their shields and spears’, wrote Robinson, in a manner that ‘resembles a valse’. The evenings on their travels were filled with music, song and dance. During the day the NSW men gathered materials and made new tools and weapons. Robinson sketched the pronged spears and canoes they used to fish as well as a parrying shield that he called a ‘Tau.rong’. They made weapons specifically for Robinson; he sent some boomerangs to Edward Curr, manager of the Van Diemen’s Land Company. Robinson also recorded their Indigenous names, the names of their ‘chiefs’, ‘tribes’, wives and a word list of their language.³⁶

English traveller Peregrine Langton Massingberd was among the party that climbed Ben Lomond with Wedge in 1833. He found the six NSW Aborigines were ‘always singing, laughing or recounting jokes’. They hunted possums and kangaroos and in the evening performed with their bodies painted ‘with wide bands’ of white ochre and their shields ‘covered over with daubs of red and white’. They explained to the Englishman the cultural meaning of their scarified backs and missing front teeth.³⁷

The NSW men were evidently free to practise and celebrate their culture in Tasmania and were willing share it with those around them. If they gave weapons to Robinson, then it seems very possible they may also have given them to Wedge. If they often gathered wood and made new weapons, then it seems likely that at least some of the four artefacts in Saffron Walden are made from Tasmanian timber. This mixing of materials and traditional practices brings to light the entangled nature of cultural relations on the Tasmanian frontier and of Batman’s home in particular. Kingston in the early 1830s was a very Indigenous place: up to ten NSW south coast men came and went, while the Tasmanian Aborigines who lived or stayed there intermittently included two boys, two guides and several large groups of adults. Some were there by force, others had come in voluntarily as part of Batman’s complicated war dealings.³⁸ When I went to Kingston in May 2017 I was struck by the intimacy of the architecture: the rooms were cramped and the outhouses huddled around small courtyards. These cultures and lives mixed in close quarters.

I travelled there with Tasmanian Aboriginal elder and historian Patsy Cameron. When we pulled up to the 1820s cottage believed to have been Batman’s home, tears sprung to her eyes. She was thinking of Luggenemenener, she later told me, and imagining what it must have been like to have been brought there in 1829. But we received a warm welcome from Kingston’s current owner, Simon Cameron. He showed us that alongside fine wool merino sheep, he is caring for one of Tasmania’s rarest

35 Brodie, pp. 97–8; Kristyn Harman, ‘Send in the Sydney natives! Deploying mainlanders against Tasmanian Aborigines’, *Tasmanian Historian Studies*, no. 14, 2009, pp. 5–24.

36 Robinson Journals, February–July 1832; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 518; Campbell, pp. 58–60.

37 Peregrine Langton Massingberd diary, 1832–33, partial transcript by J. Massingberd Campbell, MLMSS 1644, SLNSW.

38 Campbell, pp. 30–63; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 479, 505–8, 868, 951.

clusters of native grasses. Simon showed us the cabbage tree gums he's trying to grow from seed because climate change is making them scarce in the valley floor. Kingston is fortunate to have in Simon such an environmentally far-sighted owner, and his welcoming of Patsy showed his respect for the past as well. He listened when she spoke of the old trees as her kin, how the valley revealed an old highway between the clans, and the significance of finding a stone from this land perfect for grinding ritual ochre. That day Kingston became a place of cultural practice again, and even a place of reconciliation. It was an important moment, and one prompted by NSW Indigenous artefacts held on the other side of the world: a history of complex cultural encounters continues.

As I write there is an ongoing national debate about the memorialisation in statues and place names of Australia's founding 'fathers', including John Batman. He has been described recently in the press as a 'mass murderer' and 'child abductor' undeserving of public honour. It was for this reason that in May 2017 Victoria's Darebin Council changed the name of Batman Park to Gumbri Park. What does this mean for the large bridge in Tasmania and the Victorian electorate, railway station, and more than 15 avenues, streets and roads still named after Batman? As Genevieve Grieves has noted, rather than simply erase Batman's memory, we should also remember how and why he was honoured in the first place.³⁹ We should also remember the closeness and complexity of Batman's relations with Indigenous people. Not all were his victims. Some Tasmanian Aborigines, including Luggenemenener, manipulated their

relationship with him in order to advance their side in the Black War. The NSW Aborigines Batman employed were free to dance and sing. As historian Bain Attwood notes, Batman was 'remorseful' for what he had done to Tasmanian Aboriginal people. While his Port Phillip treaty was fraudulent, he nonetheless believed it was the foundation for establishing friendly relations between the Port Phillip Aborigines and the settlers. In short, Batman 'embodied the contradictory forces that informed the nature of the Port Phillip Association's colonising'.⁴⁰

Wedge appears a character less conflicted than Batman. While he too sought to profit from his membership in the association, he took on his chief responsibility of ensuring peaceable relations with the Aborigines with apparent earnestness. This role has coloured what little attention his collection has received and has been used to explain how he may have acquired the artefacts. But how accurate is this impression?

The second instalment: 1838

Wedge was in England in 1838 visiting his family and may have presented the second instalment of Indigenous artefacts to Saffron Walden Museum himself:⁴¹ one parrying shield, four oval bark shields, four boomerangs, nine or more spears, some in two parts (one shaft has human hair bound in resin to keep it firmly in place when inserted into its handle), and 11 clubs with differently shaped heads: two hook-shaped, two mushroom-shaped, two bulbous, and three tapering or rounded with a range of decorated carvings.

Maynard registered the acquisition in the 1880s.⁴² He listed some of the spears

39 Miki Perkins, 'Historic statues: Where Indigenous people and women go missing', *Age*, 3 September 2017, <<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/historic-statues-where-women-and-indigenous-people-go-missing-20170831-gy8ev2.html>>.

40 Bain Attwood with Helen Doyle, *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2008, p. 39.

41 Crawford et al., p. xix.

42 No. 1 Register, pp. 124–31.

as ‘Australian’, but the rest of the wooden Victorian weapons he listed as being ‘from Van Diemen’s Land’. This attribution went unquestioned until Tasmanian historian N.J.B. Plomley visited the museum in 1961 and pointed out the error.⁴³ Wedge’s 1838 acquisition of Indigenous artefacts was clearly Victorian and very large. It would have taken effort to gather, pack and ship. But due to the lack of any explanation in his extant notes, we are left with the intriguing task of deducing the story of its collection.

Wedge travelled from Launceston to Indented Head, near present-day Geelong, in the first week of August 1835, unable to leave his post as assistant surveyor in Tasmania any sooner. Batman had already been to Port Phillip in early May 1835, and ‘purchased’ 600 000 acres of land from the Kulin through his pre-drafted ‘treaty’. On his departure less than two weeks later, Batman left at Indented Head three of his servants (James Gumm, Alexander Thomson and William Todd) and five NSW Indigenous men (including Pigeon, ‘Bill Bullett’, ‘Joe Bungett’ and ‘Old Bull’). They had rations for three months and tools to establish a garden and huts.⁴⁴

When Wedge arrived at Indented Head, he also found seven families, or about 40 Wathaurong people. The servants had attempted to maintain good relations with them, as Batman had ordered, by distributing food and gifts, but their supplies had run out. Wedge reinstated the giving, initially every day, then once monthly.⁴⁵ This stretched the association’s resources and tested Wedge’s patience. He admitted it took ‘great forbearance’ not to respond when



John Helder Wedge, c 1860–72, photograph by H. H. Baily, P1/83, State Library NSW.

he saw how much the Wathaurong could ‘devour at one meal’, and noted that such restraint was unlikely to be maintained by future settlers without proper safeguard.⁴⁶ To this end, Wedge proposed a ‘scheme’ for ‘civilising the Aborigines’. The association should reserve some of the poorer land they had ‘purchased’. Wedge suggested the Bellarine Peninsula, where the Kulin could gain Christian instruction, useful skills and exchange cultural artefacts for goods.⁴⁷

Museum curator Elizabeth Willis wonders whether the Wedge Collection, the first formed in Port Phillip, was acquired at Indented Head in ‘barter’ with the Wathaurong as Wedge attempted to enact his ‘scheme’. Willis describes Wedge as a ‘Christian with humanitarian ideals’. He had ‘witnessed the tragedy that befell’ the Aborigines of Tasmania and was concerned this might now be repeated. He had a ‘keen interest’ in traditional culture, but hoped

43 Plomley, ‘A List of Tasmanian Aboriginal material’, p. 234.

44 Attwood, p. 45; Campbell, pp. 68, 116; Crawford et al., pp. xvi–xvii. See also Andrew Todd, alias William Todd (John Batman’s recorder) and his Indented Head journal 1835, Geelong Historical Society, 1989.

45 Campbell, pp. 116–22; Attwood, p. 64.

46 John Helder Wedge, field book 1835–36, Port Phillip Association Papers (PPA) MS 9302, SLV, <<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/268484>>, image 36.

47 Attwood, p. 64; John Helder Wedge, ‘Scheme for civilising and bringing into industrious habits the Aborigines of New Holland’, undated, PPA, MS 9142, SLV.

the Aborigines could develop skills that the settlers 'wanted'. Willis quotes historian Alan Atkinson, who describes Wedge's scheme as giving the Aborigines 'a place of their own' where they could become 'self-reliant individuals within a wider community'.⁴⁸

The Kulin, of course, already had a 'place of their own'. How realistic was it to hope they would give up their land in exchange for Christian instruction and skills the settlers wanted? As Attwood observes, the association 'couched' their treaty 'in the rhetoric of humanitarianism ... in order to sell their colonising venture to senior members of the Colonial Office who were evangelical Christians'.⁴⁹ The rise of evangelical Christianity in the British government converged with Britain's policy to encourage thousands of free settlers to take up land across the empire. Colonial governors were issued with orders to protect and ameliorate the indigenes as well as instruction to dispossess them.

Governor Arthur, who instigated one of the swiftest pastoral settlements in British history, and one of the most militarised responses to Indigenous frontier warfare, was also one of the most adept proselytisers of humanitarian governance. He declared martial law in an effort to take the conflict out of the hands of the rabid settlers. His Black Line aimed to capture Aborigines so as to place them in 'benevolent captivity' and he accepted Robinson's application for an Aboriginal establishment because it promised such an opportunity. That Robinson

succeeded in removing the Aborigines without resorting to violence was acclaimed as 'humane colonisation'. And so it was that with the rhetoric of, and possibly a genuine belief in, evangelical humanitarianism, Arthur oversaw one of the clearest cases of genocide in British imperial history.⁵⁰

Wedge was not merely a 'witness' to the 'tragedy that befell' the Tasmanian Aborigines but also an active agent of their dispossession. He and other association members had learned the doublespeak of humanitarian governance in Tasmania and as would-be founders of a new colony they had much call to practise it. Days after his arrival at Indented Head, Wedge wrote to association member James Simpson in Tasmania to inform the authorities of the 'progress' made in 'civilising' the Aborigines as it 'would tell well in strengthening our claim for confirmation of the land'.⁵¹ But he was outraged when association members suggested enlisting Aborigines forcibly to oust John Pascoe Fawkner's camp in Melbourne.⁵²

While in England in 1838 to 1842, Wedge wrote a series of long letters to the Colonial Office urging his scheme to civilise the Aborigines. He warned that 'taking possession of their country' without offering compensation would result in murderous 'depredations', and indeed his letters were soon filled with reports of bloodshed. They were also filled with repeated attempts to have the association's services and claims to land recognised. Colonial secretary Lord Russell's response was pragmatic. 'The evil

48 Elizabeth Willis, 'Gentleman Collectors: The Port Phillip District', in Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (eds), *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 118–21.

49 Attwood, p. 61.

50 Alan Lester and Fay Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance, Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 9–11, 45–6, 68–83.

51 John Helder Wedge to James Simpson, 9 and 11 August 1835, MS 1436, PPA, SLV, quoted in James Boyce, *1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2013, p. 77.

52 Attwood, p. 65.

lies too deep for the proposed remedy,' he wrote to his under-secretary. 'I do not know what else can be done,' came the reply. 'Nothing else,' was a sad and final answer.⁵³ Russell also refuted the association's claims to land.⁵⁴ Was there sincerity in Wedge's anxious petitions? This was the question I pondered as I read this rough note in his Port Phillip field book of 1835:

I much doubt from the atrocious acts of barbarity that have marked the career of Europeans amongst them, whether the white man is not more deserving of that epithet ['savage'], than the man of color, and I fear the stain is as indelibly fix[ed] on the English if not more so, than that of any other country.⁵⁵

The notion of a moral 'stain' had wide currency in evangelical discourse of the time. Indeed, the stiff earnestness suggests this is a recital of a fashionable idea. But while the language and beliefs of Victorian Christian evangelism can seem alien to us, the political expediency that accompanied it offers more familiar ground. In scepticism we trust. But Wedge wrote his messy note while camping among Wathaurong whom he was attempting to feed. This bolsters the impression of Wedge as a benevolent collector; certainly he was interested in the culture and daily life of the Wathaurong. His portraits of

individuals are sympathetically executed and suggest that Wedge was sitting among them on the ground, no doubt listening as they spoke. His field book includes lists of language words and phrases, which seem to reflect his good intentions and his interest in collecting: 'I am your friend—*Banwadejaie*'; 'will you give me this—*gunathianic*'; 'hand spear—*carp*'; 'shield—*geramb*'; 'Spear for kangaroo—*daire*'.⁵⁶

Wedge made friends among the Wathaurong community, among them Englishman William Buckley whom he met on his arrival at Indented Head. Buckley had surprised the servants and NSW men when he had appeared some weeks earlier.⁵⁷ He had escaped the former convict station at nearby Queenscliffe in 1803–04, and had since lived with the Wathaurong for about 32 years.⁵⁸ Wedge saw in Buckley an opportunity to communicate the association's plans with the Wathaurong. He arranged a free pardon for Buckley and sought his appointment as superintendent of the Aborigines.⁵⁹ The two men travelled for over a month through Port Phillip with two NSW south coast men, Steward and Bulberlang, and two Wathaurong youths whose names Wedge recorded as 'Diabering' (or 'Diaberry') and 'Joan Joan'.⁶⁰

Wedge appears respectful of his co-travellers' knowledge and bush skills. Diaberry 'considerably improved upon' his

53 Notes made on Wedge's letter of 6 February 1841, CO201/305, National Archives, Britain.

54 There are seven letters from Wedge to the secretary of state (Lord Glenelg then Russell from late 1839) from 8 June 1838 to 30 December 1839 in CO 201/293. Three letters from 18 January 1840 to 24 July 1841 are in CO201/305, and two letters dated 26 January 1841 and 17 April 1841 are in CO 201/315, National Archives, Britain.

55 Wedge, field book 1835–36, image 36.

56 Wedge, field book, images 6, 18, 79, 80, 85, 87. Three sketches from Wedge's field book 1835–36 are held in the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office: 'Three figure studies of Victorian aborigines', 'Native women gathering Tambourn Roots' and 'Buckleys Hut'.

57 Todd, p. 31.

58 Marjorie J. Tipping, 'Buckley, William (1780–1856)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/buckley-william-1844/text2133>>, published first in hardcopy 1966.

59 Attwood, p. 65; Campbell, p. 125.

60 Campbell, p. 126; Wedge, field book 1835–36, images 50, 164.

suggestion of how to cross the Werribee River by constructing an ingenious bridge. When they met with Buckley's Wathaurong friends, Wedge 'pitched his tent between' two families, and the party of 11 Aborigines remained 'sitting around my fire', he wrote, until he went to bed. Wedge often adopted the Indigenous place names his guides pointed out: Werribee, Corio Bay, Barrabool Hills and the Yarra River all recall (here with their modern spellings) Wedge's first exploratory journey.⁶¹

This adoption of Indigenous names might seem sympathetic, but for scholar Paul Carter it is more a 'disguised' colonisation. Why, asks Carter, did Wedge choose the name 'Yarra' for the river that flows through the heart of present-day Melbourne? Batman had already named the river after himself. Fawcner, who was camped by its banks when Wedge arrived, had named it the 'Hunter'. And while Wedge's Wathaurong guides called out 'Yarra Yarra' when they saw it, Wedge later learned this was a general term, meaning rapid or waterfall. But it was the very meaninglessness of the *sound* 'Yarra' to English ears that was its appeal, argues Carter. It was 'as if, in adopting the supposed Indigenous name' the association 'identified itself with the interests of the indigenous inhabitants'.⁶²

There is an element of performance to Wedge's field book. After all, he was a man living his dream, exploring a new colony! His writing suggests an awareness that he is creating an important record, and certainly

he seems to have treated the text that way. By 1836, he had rewritten his notes for publication by the Royal Geographical Society in London.⁶³ Wedge later sent his field book to James Bonwick, who reproduced it in his 1883 book *Port Phillip Settlement*. Wedge annotated several of his sketches, which were redrawn for the publication.⁶⁴

To 'disguise' colonial intent it is necessary to acquire Indigenous cultural knowledge, and that means forging close relationships with Indigenous people. While there is a possibility that Wedge collected artefacts as he travelled through Wathaurong, Woiwurrung and Bunurong Countries, it is perhaps more likely that he collected from the Wathaurong men closest to him, as he may have done with the artefacts made by NSW men in Tasmania. If so, Diabering and Joan Joan may have been the makers of some of the artefacts in the Wedge Collection, as Buckley might have been.

Notes made in Saffron Walden Museum in 1844 describe that hanging 'Over case no. 8' were 'four of Buckley's clubs of various shapes rudely ornamented'.⁶⁵ That we cannot tell which four of the 11 beautifully crafted Port Phillip clubs in the collection were 'Buckley's' is perhaps frustrating, but it is also telling. If true, it reveals the level of his enculturation in Wathaurong society; Buckley had become a maker, or at least a user, of cultural artefacts. Wedge saw the expediency of this cultural adaption for the association, but for others Buckley was 'stupid' and 'useless'. Bonwick noted that he had failed to

61 Wedge, field book 1835–36, images 49, 64, 72, 113.

62 Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language*, Faber, London, 1992, p. 127 (see also pp. 125–48).

63 John Helder Wedge, 'Country around Port Phillip 1836', manuscript, A 1429/vol. 2, John Helder Wedge Papers, 1824–43, SLNSW; J.H. Wedge, 'On the Country around Port Phillip, South Australia', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, vol. 6, 1836, pp. 419–39.

64 Bonwick, *Port Phillip Settlement*, pp. 247–80.

65 'Ethnological articles in the SW Museum preparatory for its catalogue published in 1845', *Register A*, p. 256.

‘civilise’ the Aborigines even after 30 years with them but had instead regressed to their level.⁶⁶

Over time Buckley has evolved as a kind of anti-establishment hero. The Geelong wine label ‘6Ft6’ (which recalls Buckley’s great height) celebrates his ‘daring escape from the British’, while the old saying to have ‘Buckley’s chance’ (although probably wrongly attributed to him) recalls a hapless character twice screwed over by the authorities. But the possible presence of Buckley’s clubs in Saffron Walden Museum returns legend to reality. The clubs, solid and heavy, celebrate Buckley’s life with the Wathaurong—less as a mere survivor than as a fellow craftsmen and cultural practitioner. It also suggests that Wedge talked to Saffron Walden Museum’s gentleman curators about the material that he acquired. And this might offer a further clue to the provenance of some of artefacts in the Wedge Collection.

There is an intriguing possibility that some of the artefacts in the Wedge Collection were acquired by Batman. On his first encounter with Indigenous people at Port Phillip on 31 May 1835, Batman wrote that he met with a group of women and children to whom he gave blankets, beads, sugar and looking glasses, and received in return baskets, spears and ‘a native bucket’. On 7 June, the day after he claimed to have enacted his treaty, Batman wrote that ‘the two principal chiefs came and brought their two cloaks, or royal mantles, and laid them at my feet’. They then ‘placed them round my neck, and even my shoulders, and seemed quite pleased to see me walk

about with them on’. They also ‘made me a present of native tomahawks, some spears, wommeras, boomerangs, etc.’⁶⁷ Were these encounters a source for some of the artefacts in the Wedge Collection? It is interesting that Maynard’s catalogue made a brief reference to a possum skin cloak or ‘mantle’ as he named it, that was ‘ruin’d by moth’ (and is no longer in the museum). He also listed Wedge donating a ‘bucket’. This may be the water carrier or bowl made from a gnarl of a tree that remains in the museum but without clear provenance.⁶⁸

Attwood notes that the Kulin may have understood Batman’s treaty as a version of their *tanderrum* ceremony, a formal exchange of gifts to allow for safe passage through, and temporary use of, land.⁶⁹ Is it possible that some of the artefacts in the Wedge Collection represent, more than the questionable ‘signatures’ of ‘chiefs’ on Batman’s treaty, the Kulin’s agreement to the contract as they recognised it? Batman aggrandised, and possibly fictionalised, this giving into a literal passing of the mantle in order to make him appear the Kulin’s new ‘royal’ leader. But if Batman did receive cloaks and other artefacts, he may well have passed them on to Wedge for he would have known his friend was a keen collector. Indeed, when we explore the variety and extent of Wedge’s collecting we find that not everything he acquired was from direct contact with or was even made by Indigenous people. If some of his collecting was inspired by his ostensible ‘humanitarianism’ then the majority was motivated by Wedge’s wish to amass an assortment of wonderful objects.

66 Rebe Taylor, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2008, pp. 56–7.

67 C.P. Billot, *John Batman and the Founding of Melbourne*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 89–90, 99–101.

68 No. 1 Register, pp. 20 A-20, 124; Pole, p. 16. A similar carrier is housed in the British Museum: Number Oc. 3869, donated by Henry Christy before 1870, and described as being made by an Australian community of New South Wales: Water carrier made from the gnarl or knot of a Eucalyptus (Gum) tree.

69 Attwood, pp. 56–7.

A curious miscellany

The principal focus on the Wedge Collection has been the Australian Indigenous-made artefacts, but these make up only part of what he donated to Saffron Walden Museum in the 1830s. His first donation was in 1833, of a Tasmanian lizard and fungus. His father's 1835 donation of NSW artefacts had also included the leg and a skin of an emu. (If shot in Tasmania it may have been one of the last of its species.) Charles Wedge made a separate donation in 1835 of a Māori *tewhatewha* (a long-handled, axe-shaped club), and possibly two years later he presented what Maynard thought was a central Australian spear and an arrow-shaped lance from British Guiana. These artefacts may have originally been acquired by John Helder Wedge, for his 1838 donation included not only the Port Phillip artefacts but also a *toi moko*, a tattooed and preserved Māori warrior's head.

There were also six bows, some arrows, spears, a basket, a drinking shell and a net variously described as being from the 'South Seas', New Guinea or northern Australia. Accompanying this cultural material were four geological specimens from the island of Ascension: two ducks' heads, 24 birds, two 'flying' possums, a platypus, a kangaroo and a quoll. In 1839, Edward Wedge (who had migrated to Tasmania with his brother) donated a collection of insects and fossilised wood, while some time before 1845 their sister, Elizabeth Darke (who had followed her brothers to the colony), donated a collection of Tasmanian sea sponges and shells, although these specimens may originally have been collected by John Helder Wedge.⁷⁰

Wedge had a strong interest in science and in biology in particular. He collected the leaves in the field, pressed them between the pages of his Tasmanian letterbook and may also have studied them with the microscope he had in Tasmania in the 1820s.⁷¹ When Anna Maria Dixon travelled with Wedge on his return to Van Diemen's Land in 1843, she wrote he 'was constantly imparting ... some information in natural history'.⁷² Wedge wrote of shooting at birds in Tasmania and Victoria, but it is more likely that he purchased his natural history specimens from private traders. There was a market for exotic Australian animals and birds, as there was for non-Australian indigenous material. Māori traded many *toi moko* and clubs with Europeans for guns from the early nineteenth century. (Saffron Walden Museum repatriated two *toi moko* in 2005, but were unable to locate that which Wedge donated.)

Wedge shared his interest in science and collecting with his father Charles, who had been a member of the Saffron Walden Natural History Society since its foundation in 1832. The society opened what was one of England's earliest purpose-built public museums three years later with the goal of displaying for the 'enquiring of every class' specimens of natural history, antiquity and ethnography of such wonder as 'to induce the most thoughtless to stand awhile and admire'. The 1845 catalogue, possibly Britain's first illustrated museum catalogue, reveals an ambitious policy of international collecting: a stuffed giraffe, an elephant and a rhinoceros faced several of their skeletal counterparts amid a miscellany of exotic

70 The quoll is listed as a 'Dasijure' (quoll is the most likely translation). No. 1 Register, p. 610. The Wedges' donations are listed in No. 1 Register, pp. 1–2, 23–4, 55H, 112, 124–31, 367, 610 and in Register A, pp. 256–64, 318, 363, 375. See also the indices at the back of Registers No. 1 and A.

71 John Helder Wedge, Letterbook, 1824–43, A 1430, SLNSW; Jean M. Uhl, 'The Men of East Anglia—the Wedge Family', *Victorian Historical Magazine, Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria*, vol. 37, issue 143 (1966), pp. 22–49, at p. 29.

72 Anna Maria Nixon, *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land 1843–1863: Letters and Memories of Francis Russell Nixon, D.D. First Bishop of Tasmania*, collected and compiled by Norah Nixon, Walch & Sons, Hobart, 1953, p. 3.

birds, classical antiquities and ethnological collections from Africa, the South Seas, the Americas and Australia.⁷³

Saffron Walden had long held a confident place in international trade and empire. Its name originated from the middle-eastern plant that, from the 1500s, grew well in the region and was traded far as a cloth die. Nineteenth-century industrialism and colonisation expanded this prosperity, and Saffron Walden Museum presented their collections in a way that celebrated the local community's connections with empire and social hierarchy.⁷⁴ A pair of yellow boots, 'handsomely embroidered', had been worn by Lord Amhurst (chief patron of the museum) on his embassy to China. 'The Cape of the war cloak of Rhio Rhio the king of the Sandwich Islands' had been 'presented to the Hon. Frederick Byng who was appointed by George IV to attend him. He died shortly after of the measles'. Who in this story died of the measles is not clear, but the point here is that the *story* of the cloak's collection was important to the museum's gentlemen curators who documented it.⁷⁵

This is notably distinct from how and why ethnographic material was collected by and displayed in British museums after the 'Darwinian revolution' of the 1850s. Then the stories of collection and the diversity of culture were muted in an anthropological goal to illustrate the universal and progressive stages of human cultural evolution. It was partly because Saffron Walden Museum predated this theoretical framework and celebrated the stories of collection that, somewhat conversely, the provenance of the Wedge Collection became muddled. Most of the items were listed in the 1840s as being

from 'JH Wedge, Esqr. Van Diemen's Land', which meant that Maynard assumed that the address of the collector was also the origin of the artefacts' makers.

The Indigenous wooden artefacts are largely all that is left of the Wedge Collection. In 1960 the museum expunged almost all of its international taxidermy collection: more than 200 animals were burnt at the city dump. The reasoning was their poor condition, but it also reflected the desire to offer a more local and modern focus to the museum.⁷⁶ Devoid of the birds and animals Wedge collected, it is possible to see his collection in the way the *Hindsight* documentary presented it: as a result or realisation of his humanitarian interest in, and concern for, Indigenous people. But finally I want to explore an aspect of Wedge's life that challenges that image. It begins with the alarming encounter with spear-wielding Aborigines that I mentioned earlier.

The handkerchief, 1 May 1828

It was just after breakfast and Wedge was a little distance from his camp. The chatter of his men packing was faint against the crash of waves carried on the breeze. It was going to be an easier day. The weather had cleared after days of driving wind and rain. They could walk along the beach rather than through thick forest and knee-deep mud, and they still had fresh provisions. Surviving on a stray lamb and two shot kangaroos shared among 14 men had been grim. So it was a peaceful moment alone. Then Wedge looked up. An Aboriginal warrior, 'the native', in Wedge's words, was 'standing perfectly motionless, with a bunch of spears on his back'.⁷⁷

73 An Abridged Catalogue of the Saffron Walden Museum, 1845, p. ii (pasted into *Register A*, p. 590.).

74 Pole, pp. 3–5; 'Saffron Walden Town Trail', pamphlet published by the Saffron Walden Initiative Project, 2008.

75 *Register A*, pp. 226, 252.

76 Rachel Poliquin, 'The matter and meaning of museum taxidermy', *Museum and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2008), pp. 123–34, at p. 124.

77 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828, Wedge Family Papers.

Wedge had every reason to feel alarm. This remote north-west coast was a new frontier and it was fresh with violence. The Van Diemen's Company shepherds had arrived six months earlier, about 20 kilometres north, and with devastating impact. They had killed 12 Peerapper as they camped at night. Days later they surprised a larger group sharing an evening meal just below the cliffs. They shot them and threw their bodies, some still alive, over the precipice. Now Wedge's task was to traverse the perimeter of the company's vast 200 000-kilometre lease to determine how much more land could be used for grazing. By the time he began his journey, the Peerapper had been joined by the five other north-west tribes to fight for their Country.⁷⁸

The warrior stood less than 100 metres from Wedge, almost within spearing distance. Or was Wedge imagining it? The man was so still, and held his spears in such a peculiar way, that Wedge thought he might be looking at a tree stump. But then the man disappeared behind some dunes and Wedge was alone again—but not really.⁷⁹ Wedge knew the warrior had been a warning: he and his men were being watched.

Wedge returned to the camp with orders: he and one other would stay to guard the knapsacks and blankets; the remaining 12 should split and go 'on the lookout'. He soon heard gunfire. One group had encountered 16 Aboriginal men, armed with spears. They had opened fire as one was poised to throw his weapon. The man 'jumped up a great height and then fell down', Wedge was

told, 'but he ran away with the rest'.⁸⁰ More shots were heard from the beach, fired at an Aborigine as he dived into the sea, but they missed. Wedge stood with his men on the shore to watch him. The swell was huge; 'a boat would have filled and swamped in ten minutes', but the swimmer managed to surmount each wave with a smooth stroke. But after half an hour he became exhausted, and was washed onto the shore.⁸¹

It was only a boy, no more than ten years old. They rubbed him down, carried him to a fire and covered him with a blanket. He slept for an hour. As he watched him, Wedge made a decision. He would take him. The boy awoke terrified; he thought they were going to kill him. Wedge took him by the hand, and made signs he was to go with him. He 'evinced fear', Wedge later wrote, but with 'a little kind encouragement' he 'walked without giving trouble'. It was only ... as a matter of precaution, Wedge added, that 'I lead him with my handkerchief tied round his wrist [sic]'.⁸² The account is carefully understated. Robert Drew, Wedge's coxswain, remembers the violence more clearly: the boy 'wanted his people'. He showed Wedge 'contempt'. And 'they tied his hands' all the time 'they was on that part of the coast'; they were tied for three days.⁸³

When they resumed their journey, travelling south along the beach, Wedge wrote that 'the rest of the natives disappeared'. Only their footsteps were seen in the sand, and 'the boy intimated they were not far distant'.⁸⁴ Again his language is overly calm, and it may also be untrue. Drew recalls that

78 Ryan, pp. 16, 34, 166–7.

79 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828, and letter (draft) from John Helder Wedge to Dr Ross, 14 November 1832, Wedge Family Papers.

80 Letter to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828.

81 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828; letter to Dr Ross, p. 2 (folio 111 verso).

82 Letter to Dr Ross, p. 4 (folio 113 verso).

83 Report by Robert Drew or Rue as recorded by G.A. Robinson in his journal, 21 June 1830, SLNSW, vol. 6, Z A 7027; see also Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 215.

84 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828.

they did see the boy's tribe. Again the child called out, wishing 'to go to this mother', in fact 'he cryed very much'.⁸⁵

There are no tears in Wedge's account, but he and Drew agree about what happened at the top of Mt Cameron. There the ground was rocky and steep. The boy slipped his hand from the handkerchief and ran. He leapt from rock to rock as fast as could, racing down to the beach. He was 'at liberty', recalled Drew. It was 'a gallant attempt to escape', reflected Wedge, especially as it was done 'in the face of seven men armed with muskets'. But on Wedge's orders the boy was 'pursued' and caught again, seconds before he plunged into the sea.⁸⁶

The survey continued for another three weeks, down the rugged west coast to the Arthur River before they turned inland and walked back up to Circular Head. It was wild country, threaded with rivers, which after days of heavy rain began to flood. Rations were reduced to a few ounces of flour a day. But the boy never complained; he was always able to find bush food. Wedge no longer had to 'lead him by his handkerchief'. He was no longer in his Country. But Wedge thought he had become 'reconciled to the change'. He has 'continued with me ever since', he told his father.⁸⁷

May Day

Wheete (or 'Whetee') Coolera was how Wedge wrote his name, although he also called him 'May Day', after the day he took him. He became Wedge's 'constant companion', living with him at Leighlands, and travelling with him on his survey work.

Wedge's work largely comprised marking off the boundaries of land grants in the northern and central midlands, and he invariably accepted the hospitality offered by landowners along the way. Wheete joined him in parlours and at dining tables. At a time when the settlers were locked in a war with the Aborigines of their own districts, Wheete was treated as an amusing curiosity.

He was made to demonstrate his expertise in throwing a spear and waddy, tracking (while blindfolded) and, sadly, 'in hiding himself'. He was also required to hand around cakes and coffee. At an evening party in Hobart, guests pressured him to kiss a young lady. He went up to her, touched her neck and then kissed his fingers. It showed, Wedge thought, 'a delicacy of feeling which his fairer brethren need not be ashamed to emulate'. Or perhaps it showed Wheete didn't want to touch her skin with his mouth.⁸⁸

Some of the ladies in the district had, Wedge believed, a special attachment to Wheete. So it was, when in writing to a client on a matter of business in September 1830, that Wedge ended the letter with a message for his wife: 'Mrs Leake will, I am sure be sorry to hear of the death of her old acquaintance Whetee Coolera—alias May Day—he died just a month ago with a violent inflammation of the chest'.⁸⁹

What a frightening death for a child: struggling to breathe, drifting into unconsciousness and knowing he would never see his family again. But Wedge wrote only of his own feelings. 'I miss him very much and feel his loss,' Wedge expressed to John Leake. 'He was an attached and faithful friend!!!'

85 Report by Robert Drew; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 215.

86 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 215; Letter to Dr Ross, p. 4 (folio 113 verso).

87 Letter from John Helder Wedge to Charles Wedge, 16 October 1828; Letter to Dr Ross, p. 8 (folio 115 verso); Wedge Diary and memoranda, January – end May 1828, SLNSW; Crawford et al., pp. xxv–xxvi.

88 Letter to Dr Ross, pp. 11–12 (folio 121, recto and verso).

89 Letter from John Helder Wedge to John Leake, 3 September 1830, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Materials Collection, Australia, <<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/10231/1/L1B545.pdf>>.

he emphasised to another friend.⁹⁰ But Wedge did not suffer loneliness for long. He closed his letter to John Leake with the news: 'Since that event my family has had a great increase. I have now three native boys with me, one of them a brother of poor Whetee's'.⁹¹

Wedge had gone to the Launceston Gaol in late August 1830, perhaps knowing that Wheete's older brother was held there. Nicermenic had been taken by VDL Company manager Edward Curr at Circular Head as a child, and released in late 1829 with orders that he return to his people and inform them of the 'peaceable' intentions of the company. Instead Nicermenic joined forces with Walyer, a young woman who had lived with sealers on the Bass Strait islands, to fight the company. Six months later Nicermenic was captured by Robinson and sent to Launceston.⁹²

So it was that Nicermenic learned the fate of his little brother from the very man who had abducted him, and who now wanted to take him to where Wheete had died. Perhaps it was on a whim that Wedge chose to take 'Jemmie and Tommy' home as well, but none of the boys stayed long. 'Nicermenic ... run away with two others of Mr W's black boys,' noted Robinson in early October 1830. He returned to the north-west coast and resumed fighting the VDL Company. He was still fighting in mid 1834, but by 1836 Nicermenic was incarcerated in Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement.⁹³

Throughout all this time there had been another child in Wedge's 'care': the daughter of an Aboriginal woman and a sealer, John Dobson, one of the sealers who had once lived with Walyer on the islands.⁹⁴ Several girls were sent from the Bass Strait islands to north Tasmania in the 1820s, possibly to work in service. She joined Wedge's household in 1828, but seven years later Wedge had sent her away to Flinders Island.⁹⁵ He complained that she had 'turned out so incorrigibly bad ... a drunkard, a thief and a prostitute ... contaminated', Wedge reasoned, by bad influences. The child (I cannot find her name among any records) had perhaps sought the friendship of the other islander girls near Launceston, many of whom were 'vagrants' who had been either been abandoned or had escaped abuse.⁹⁶

What were Wedge's interests in having five Aboriginal children in his 'care'? He was a bachelor until, at the age of 50, he married 20-year-old Maria Medland Wills shortly after meeting her on his return voyage from England in 1843. Her employer, Anna Maria Nixon, had found Wedge was 'particularly kind' to her young daughters, and was surprised when he wanted to marry their governess. Indeed, Miss Wills had treated Wedge's interest 'as the kind attention of an uncle'. It was a short marriage: Maria died a year later, from complications during pregnancy. Wedge was 'desolate', thought Mrs Nixon, but was in 'far better spirits' when he became bursar for the new Christ Church

90 Letter from Wedge to John Leake; Letter to Dr Ross, p. 12 (folio 121 verso).

91 Letter from John Helder Wedge to John Leake, 3 September 1830.

92 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 466, n. 131.

93 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 466, n. 131; N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987, pp. 877, 879.

94 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 326, 334.

95 Wedge Diary and memoranda, 24 and 25 March 1834; Crawford et al., p. 71.

96 Letter from John Helder Wedge to the Aboriginal Committee, January 1834, CSO 1/330/7578, TAHO; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp. 478–9; Patsy Cameron, *Grease and Ochre: The Blending of Two Cultures at the Colonial Sea Frontier*, Fullers Bookshop, Hobart, 2011, p. 109.

school for boys in 1846 before entering politics.⁹⁷ It was during this time that botanical artist Anna Frances Walker remembers how Wedge visited her family's home for Sunday lunches at Longford, north Tasmania, when she was a child:

Mr Wedge the Surveyor, was Wedge by name and nature, for he took good care to slice off a piece of a joint for himself whenever he could manage it. My childish impression was that he had a long red foxy face—that I would not trust.⁹⁸

Children have sharp intuition, and it is tempting to share Anna's distrust. But even if Wedge's interest in children was disquieting, their presence in his home was not that unusual. About 50 Aboriginal children were known to have been taken by settlers between 1809 and 1823, mostly following attacks on their parents, although the real figure was probably far higher. There was little shame or secrecy in taking them. Jacob Mountgarrett, who led the charge against the Aborigines at the Risdon Cove massacre in 1804, took a three-year-old boy. 'Robert Hobart May', like Wheete, 'entertained his captors throwing spears, dancing and tracking down kangaroos.'⁹⁹

Wedge's friends had taken children: John Batman and Dr Pearson, who had asked Wheete to track blindfolded. They treated 'their' children as no less their rightful property than the land they had been granted. Batman refused to let 'his' two boys go to the Flinders Island Aboriginal Establishment

as Robinson requested.¹⁰⁰ Wedge too felt some right to Wheete; he applied to the governor for an issue of clothing and bedding, which was granted with the 'full expectation' that the child would facilitate communication with his people.¹⁰¹ This was a society at war with Aborigines; removing their children, as well as using them as a source of intelligence were tactics in determining success.

Having *five* children was, however, unusual, and indeed Wedge believed his interests to be distinct. Most settlers took children as free labour, he explained to a friend. They forced them to work alongside social 'outcasts' who made 'slaves' of the children 'at night'. But Wedge countered that he had kept Wheete away from the servants; he did not constrain him; he allowed him to play, and treated him as if he were his own child. Even his reasons for taking him he believed were virtuous. He had 'saved' him from the surf and from cold. (This idea was repeated by Wedge's biographers without any reflection as to why the boy had plunged into the surf in the first place.) Wedge also wrote that he took Wheete in order to demonstrate Aborigines' humanity and to prove their potential to be improved:

I had long wished to have a boy of this description under my own care—for I always dissented from the prevailing opinion that, however kindly treated even if taken, in their infancy, they would be treacherous and take the first opportunity to return their tribes again.¹⁰²

97 Nixon, pp. 3, 45. Wedge was an elected member of the Legislative Council of Tasmania from 1855–1868: G. H. Stancombe, 'Wedge, John Helder (1793–1872)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wedge-john-helder-2778/text3951>, published first in hardcopy 1967

98 Anna Frances Walker, 'Family Traditions and Personal Recollections', 26 April 1905, DLMSQ 528, SLNSW, p. 32

99 Ryan, pp. 51, 62–3.

100 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 479; Campbell, p. 61; Letter to Dr Ross, p. 11 (folio 121).

101 Letter from John Helder Wedge to John Burnett, 1 October 1828, CSO1/1/341/7832, TAHO.

102 Letter to Dr Ross, p. 8 (folio 115 verso).

Wedge admitted there was some 'colour' in the belief that Aboriginal children would abscond (he'd had first hand experience of this too) but he may have reasoned the three boys left and the girl turned 'bad' because of their earlier mistreatment at the hands of low-class whites, not the kindly treatment of a civilised gentleman. In line with this reasoning, Wedge believed that in Wheete he had 'completely falsified' the belief that the Tasmanian Aborigines were 'little more than brutes', and had 'proved' it was possible to 'train' them to become 'useful'.¹⁰³ These are intimations of Wedge's later 'scheme' to transform the Aborigines of Port Phillip, shaped by his experience with Tasmanian Aboriginal children. Wedge's most humanitarian endeavour began with his most brutal act. Here is the violent heart of 'humane colonisation'.

Tasmania's Black War demonstrated the impossibility of that oxymoron, but Wedge lived that contradiction in his work and in his personal relationships. His wish, like that of Arthur and Robinson, that he could colonise humanely, depended upon ignorance, or at best sheer hope: that the Aborigines would give up their land in exchange for 'civilisation' and Christianity. It is only within this optimistic and misguided paradigm that Wedge might be perceived as a man with 'humanitarian aspirations'. But taking Wheete by force cuts through any such paradigm. It wasn't like drawing a map or writing a scheme, or even surveying in the field. Those activities could be carried out with high ideals, a sense of adventure and a dream for a better future. They could encompass the oxymoron of 'humane colonisation'. But the moment of taking the child could not. That was immediate and physical. It involved coercion and touch. The very object Wedge used to restrain the child was personal: a

handkerchief. Even Drew, a man roughened by a life at sea, who had lived with Aboriginal women whom he had not only seen beaten but confessed to beating himself, saw the cruelty of the act.¹⁰⁴ And in the efforts to downplay and conceal the brutality of his actions, we know that Wedge saw it too.

In all of this, Wedge was hardly unique. But what distinguished him from other hypocritical colonists of his time was that he was also a collector. The extent and diversity of Wedge's original donations to Saffron Walden Museum reveal his desire to possess the exotic and rare. Wedge had 'long wished to have' such a boy as Wheete. He wanted to experiment upon the potential of the boy's race. And so he treated Wheete as he would a curious natural history specimen. Wedge simply, disturbingly, collected him.

Remembering May Day

Every year, members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community gather at Mt Cameron or, as they call it, Priminghana. It is a sacred mountain. During this time of cultural celebration and community gathering, a descendant of Wheete, Aunty Colleen Mundy, tells the story of how his hands were tied, how he cried for his mother and how he tried to escape, running down the mountain. Aunty Colleen's son, Clinton Mundy, says that when he stands on the beaches near Preminghana, he thinks about what if must have been like for Wheete:

I can feel his little heart pounding when I think of him trying to swim away from the men on the beach ... it brings tears to my eyes, it makes my heart race with anxiety. I take great comfort in the fact that his brother Nicermenic became a feared enemy of the white people up there.

¹⁰³ Letter to Dr Ross, pp. 8–9 (folio 115, verso to folio 117).

¹⁰⁴ Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp. 995–6.

Whenever Clinton drives near Wedge's farm, Leighlands, he always thinks of 'the boys Wedge abducted'. 'The history is never far from my mind', he said, 'it is with me every day.' It is a painful memory to carry. 'What Wedge did was heartbreaking', said Clinton; 'evil'.¹⁰⁵

Our conversations led me to visit the beach near Preminghana too. I went alone, and without much time; the light was fading as I began my walk. It was, quite aptly, early May. The wind was strong, and cold. The surf was up. The little sandpipers whistled as they ran along the water's edge. Beautiful pebbles clustered at intervals along the beach. The sky was turning a burnt orange. I was breathing hard. I wanted to get as far along the beach as I could in the little time I had. Why? What was I trying to do? I looked down at my striding boots and the distinctive tracks they left in the sand. I thought of the boy seeing his mother's footsteps. I thought of my ten-year-old boy at home in Melbourne. It was getting dark, and time to turn around. I took a moment to look out across the surf. I knew why I had come: to try to bear witness to the scene of Wedge's crime; because it felt important to remember. 'I am sorry!' I shouted into the wind. 'Sorry Wheete Coolera!'. I turned away, and almost ran back to the warm car, exhausted.

When I first saw the Wedge Collection in Saffron Walden Museum in 2008 and wondered what stories of encounter had formed it, I hadn't expected to find myself on a beach on the north west coast of Tasmania, choked with tears. So I began to look to the artefacts in Saffron Walden Museum in a new way: less as 'traded' than *desired*, less

'given' than *taken*—taken by a man who also took children, who is remembered as 'evil'.

But such a way of looking does the artefacts a disservice. Why should Wedge's actions detract from their beauty? It seems significant that they are weapons, solid and strong. They can stand as their own witnesses to their makers. They carry their own stories, culture and memory. They don't need to be 'Wedge's' artefacts.

I have begun building relationships with the NSW south coast and Kulin Indigenous communities to whom the artefacts belong. This has been facilitated by the Indigenous Services team at State Library New South Wales as part of the Coral Thomas Fellowship. Together with State Library Victoria and the eScholarship Research Centre at The University of Melbourne, we are creating a web resource that brings together the digitised collections formed by Wedge with their historical contexts. The digital images of the artefacts will be accessible only to Indigenous community members and will be made publicly available once community-agreed protocols are met. Community members will also have the opportunity to offer their cultural narratives and knowledge to be included alongside the institutional records.¹⁰⁶

I hope the artefacts Wedge collected will contribute to a longer history of cultural endurance and celebration and that they inspire new stories of return and resurgence. It is good to have a positive end to this story, or rather, it is good to have a new beginning for the Wedge Collection. •

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¹⁰⁵ These quotes come from a series of conversations held with Clinton Mundy between late 2016 and June 2017.

¹⁰⁶ The digital images of artefacts in the Wedge Collection will be managed using Mukurtu, the open source platform built with indigenous communities and the Centre for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University to manage and share digital cultural heritage.